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The newer and bigger big-box buildings: Warehouse/distribution centers

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Remember the 1980s big boxes started to pop up all over. Walmart discovered New England, along with K-Mart, Home Depot, BJ's, Costco and several grocery stores that wanted building sizes in excess of 60,000 s/f. The build-out of ever larger buildings and malls accelerated through the 1980s and 1990s even though most of the aforementioned big box retailers discovered that good, flat, well located, and wetland free land was hard to find in New England. But, they persisted, and managed to find sites that were more expensive to develop than sites in other parts of the country. New England isn't at big-box saturation yet, but we have seen a slowdown, partially due to the recession, in large store development. Some infill is still needed, but the end users are becoming ever more selective and need to assure themselves that they aren't just cannibalizing their existing stores.

Now, we are seeing a new round of even bigger big-box buildings. They are called "warehouse/distribution" centers. As I've pointed out, most of the easy sites have been taken, although warehouse/distribution sites don't need to be in high traffic areas like big-box retail centers, they do need: easy access/egress (proximity to airports, railways and major highway networks), favorable site topography, large land tracts preferably with public utilities, and permittable sites (meaning relatively free of wetland, endangered species and an assortment of other potential environmental and/or archaeological issues). It is a formidable list of requirements to say the least.

Typically three or four potential warehouse/distribution sites are presented to the end user, and then....the "due diligence" begins. Step one is having land surveyors, wetlands specialists and, engineers prepare a "rough" base plan showing the tract(s) of land which would have to be acquired to fit the building size, and then overlaying the best available topography and wetlands data that is available. Access and egress points, as well as special features are also included on the base plan(s).

In general, the initial round of due diligence takes the selection process down to 2 or 3 sites and the due diligence process can then focus on a "fatal flaw" analysis. For example, it may be necessary to acquire an additional tract(s) of land. In this case, the surveyor, site engineer, and the commercial realtor have to work together closely to determine the most cost-effective approach to the required land assembly - or - it may become evident that an assemblage just won't work and it's time to go back to looking at the list of potential sites.

The above is just one example of a "fatal flaw". Among the others that may be encountered are the following: a) excessive ledge, b) scattered wetlands (or worse vernal pools), c) significant road upgrades required to accommodate truck loads, d) no available utilities (fire protection service and utility installation can be a huge cost), e) environmental issues ranging from endangered species to shoreland protection regulations, g) proximity of the workforce, h) drainage feasibility (which is a major concern when dealing with up to 50 acres of impervious surfaces), and i) every other possible

negative including NIMBY syndrome.

And there you have it - somehow or other you have now settled on a site for your warehouse/distribution facility with a footprint ranging from 50,000 s/f upwards to 750,000 s/f, or more. The acreage under agreement may range from 5 to 100 acres, and, you have a valid purchase and sale agreements in place. Now.... all you have to do, is secure the necessary federal, state and local permits and you'll be ready to build.

It has been our experience that the permitting and design process on structures that may enclose up to 15 or more acres, is an interactive and iterative process requiring all the professional disciplines to constantly and effectively communicate with each other, as well as municipal officials and regulators. TFMoran has worked on several warehouse/distribution facilities and has historically had success in the approval process of these large scale projects by combining our in-house disciplines of survey, site engineering, drainage design, wetlands delineation, traffic and utility engineering, septic design, structural engineering, and landscape architecture all under direction of one project manager who can better coordinate the fast time schedule for approvals and the frequent design and construction changes.

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